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In Los Angeles, protesting Vandenberg's ICBM launch

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Last Friday afternoon, I joined 30 friends for a peace vigil on Douglas Street in Los Angeles outside the Space and Missile Systems Center at the El Segundo Air Force Base, right next to the L.A. airport. We were protesting the midnight launch of a first-strike, nuclear capable ICBM Minuteman III missile aimed for the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, 4,200 miles away. Surrounded by the mammoth office buildings of Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, Northrup Grumman, the U.S. Air Force and other "corporations of death," we held signs and banners, shared our hopes and sang songs of peace and life.

The missile went off around 2 a.m. Saturday as part of the decades-long ICBM Minuteman III testing program at Vandenberg Air Force Base. This latest ICBM test launch had a dummy warhead, but the 450 land-based ICBMs are built to carry thermonuclear warheads designed to destroy large civilian populations. Once launched, even if by accident, they can't be called back. Each test costs at least \$20 million.

At midnight, another crowd gathered outside the front gate of Vandenberg Air Force Base on the coast of California near San Luis Obispo for a similar protest. Speakers such as Daniel Ellsberg, Cindy Sheehan and Fr. Louis Vitale condemned the launch, the ICBM Minuteman III testing program, the use of the Marshall Islands as a target and the hydrogen bombs that remain on hair-trigger alert, ready to kill millions at a moment's notice.

"For the past 47 years, the mission of the Minuteman missiles has been to pre-empt an attack on warning," Daniel Ellsberg said in a statement. "These land-based missiles are vulnerable first-strike weapons. They are wholly-anachronistic lightning rods for 'accidental' nuclear war. This is an intolerable situation that should and could end tomorrow. Unilaterally getting rid of our land-based Minuteman missiles would not be unilateral disarmament. We would still have more than enough weapons to

constitute a doomsday device through our 14 nuclear weapon submarines."

Fifteen people, including Ellsberg, were arrested at midnight in an act of nonviolent civil disobedience for walking onto the Vandenberg base to protest the missile launch.

"When North Korea recently fired off four short-range missiles, the world became hysterical," Macgregor Eddy, one of the organizers, told me on the phone beforehand. "People asked, 'Could they reach Hawaii?' Yet here we continue to test and launch such missiles at Vandenberg and target the Marshall Islands. This has been going on for years. There's nothing secret about it. They're very proud of it. We want people to pay attention to this. We're trying to draw attention to our egregious violations of the World Court and international law and the double standard of testing and improving our arsenal while the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty calls us to disarm.

"A thermonuclear warhead is not a weapon without a missile," she continued. "It doesn't work without a delivery system. At Vandenberg, they test the missiles that carry hydrogen bombs. They develop the missile systems, improve them and test them to see if they still work. We protest this missile system."

That's the message I heard standing in the hot sun outside the L.A. Air Force headquarters where those missiles are directed toward the Marshall Islands. "We protest the misuse of public funds and call for their redirection to meet authentic human needs," Jeff Dietrich of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker told me, as I walked around, asking folks why they were there. "This Air Force Base not only directs the missile tests for nuclear weapons, but also directs the U.S. drones used in Afghanistan, which kill children. We protest all of this."

"I follow the exorbitant allocations of money given to the U.S. Defense Department because I think of the many ways we could use that money to house the homeless and feed the hungry," Catherine Morris of the L.A. Catholic Worker said. "With that money, we could easily end homelessness in the U.S. There is no need for this except for greed. So I'm here to say no to death and yes to life."

"The Pacific Islands have been colonized for hundreds of years, and another wave of colonization is hitting them right now -- private investment backed with further militarization," one protester from Micronesia told our group. "It's being discussed and defended as a way to contain China, but in doing so, we are imposing U.S. hegemony upon the Pacific Islands."

"We want these tests to stop," said Amelia, a U.S. citizen whose family comes from the South Pacific. "We want to reimagine ways to work together, but as long as corporations and the U.S. government bomb the islands, we will continue the struggle."

"It's madness to keep spending billions on these weapons that must never be used," said Carol Uner of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, one of the vigil's sponsors. "We must work for a nuclear-free future for the world's children. It's unconscionable to keep testing these missiles for nuclear weapons when there are so many opportunities now to move toward a nuclear-free future.

"There is so much hope on which we must be building," she continued. "For example, in 2010, 187 nations of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, including the United States, agreed to a high-level conference in 2012 to explore possibilities for a nuclear- and weapons of mass destruction-free zone in the Middle East. All Arab nations and Iran support such a treaty. Polls tell us the majority of Israelis do as well. ... We believe our national security would be greatly enhanced if the Air Force donated the \$20,000,000 [for this missile test] to our local school districts rather than wasting the money on nuclear missile testing."

Last month, The Associated Press reported that the Obama administration is exploring ways to cut the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

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"Any decrease in the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal would be a step in the right direction, but the lower level being considered would be a major step toward a world free of nuclear weapons," wrote David Krieger from the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, who was one of the speakers at the Vandenberg protest. "It would demonstrate to the world that the U.S. is serious about achieving nuclear disarmament, as it is obligated to do under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty."

"You can't simultaneously prepare for and prevent nuclear war," read one of the signs in our peace vigil. Another ICBM will be launched later this week.

In L.A. and Vandenberg, we tried to say publicly: Stop these tests, abolish these weapons, fund nonviolent ways to resolve international conflict, don't target the people of the Marshall Islands, clean up the ocean, feed the hungry, house the homeless and eliminate the root causes of war.

Later that night, I spoke in Orange at the Center for Spiritual Development, then drove to Flagstaff, Ariz., where I spoke Saturday night. The evil missile launch was on my mind, so in both places, I shared my experience at our L.A. peace vigil. On Saturday night, while signing copies of my new book in Flagstaff, a gentleman approached and told me his story. Long ago, he worked in that El Segundo AFB office, he said, where he directed those exact ICBM missile tests aimed at the Kwajalein Atoll. But then he heard a lecture by Charlie Clements, the heroic doctor who served the poor during El Salvador's war. Inspired by Clements, he quit his work preparing for nuclear war, went to medical school and now serves as a doctor for the poorest of the poor on the Hopi reservation in Arizona. He's trying to be a peacemaker by serving the poor.

I was so moved by his story and grateful to meet him. His journey is the journey we're all on -- turning away from the culture of war and starting down the path of peace, love and service.

"War is not the answer," we sang at the end of our peace vigil. "This insanity must cease. The time has come for peace." May the tests end soon, so that all of us can get on with the great work of creating a nuclear free world.

John Dear will speak March 8 at the Festival Center in Washington, D.C. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*; *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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